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ISLAM AS A FACTOR IN WEST AFRICAN CULTURE

By George W. Ellis, K.C., F.R.G.S.

Whether we consider Africa in the character and magnitude of its topographical outlines, or in the force and number of its mad and rushing rivers; whether in the nature and wonder of its cataracts that fall and foam, or in the majesty and glory of its mountains, lifting their summits above the clouds; whether in the luxuriant wealth and variety of its flora and fauna, or in the beauty and splendor of its rising and setting suns, painting the landscapes in colors, gilding the hillsides with gold, and purpling the clouds as they are forming and floating by; or whether in the serious study of the many sociological and religious problems which affect the character, culture and destiny of its splendid and robust races, to the layman as well as to the student, Africa is always fascinating and delightful.

BRIEF ORIGIN OF ISLAM IN WEST AFRICA

The history of Islam in West Africa is more than interesting. The weight of authority seems to be that Islam probably crossed the Sahara about the 11th century, A.D., although the Tarik, a history of the Western Sudan written in the 17th century by Amir Es Sardi, contains a reference to a prince of the Songhai Kingdom, who about 1000 A.D. became a follower of Muhammad. Upon the authority of Leo Africanus we believe that many of the African races accepted the tenets of Muhammad during the reign of Usif Iben Tashfin, the founder of Morocco, as early as 1062 A.D.¹ Dr. Barth, a German traveler, ascribes the introduc-

¹ *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, Blyden, p. 6.

tion of Islam into Bornu to the year 1086, during the reign of Hume who perhaps died on his way to or from the city of Mecca. Mr. Morel, a noted English authority on West African affairs, is of the opinion that Islam was in the region of the Senegal about the 9th century A.D.,² and pressing eastward reached Gao on the Niger near the opening of the 11th century, and continued in a triumphal march to the great African (Negro) kingdom of Kanem.

But whichever way it came, it came from without, and was felt among the Blacks of the Niger Bend in the 11th century; and upon such eminent authorities as Morel, DuBois, Blyden, and others Islam became an important factor in the religious faith and practice of the finer Black races of the continent. It is said that throughout the northern half of Africa, the Koran, its sacred book, is read from the "Atlantic to the Red Sea, and from the Mediterranean to the Congo."

Dr. Blyden, in these words, well likened its phases to the English drum beat described so poetically by Daniel Webster:

They keep company with the hours, and from lofty minarets encircle the globe with one unbroken strain of the mellifluous sounds of Arabia—Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.³

ISLAMIC INFLUENCE IN ARABIA

There has been a great deal of discussion as to the character and effect of Islam. Palgrave sums it up in these words:

Islam is in itself stationary, and was formed thus to remain; sterile like its God, lifeless like its first principle in all that constitutes life—for life is love, participation and progress, and of these the Koranic deity has none. It justly repudiates all change, all development, to borrow the forcible words of Lord Houghton, the written book is there the dead man's hand, stiff and motionless; whatever savors of vitality is by that alone convicted of heresy and defection.⁴

² *Affairs of West Africa*, Morel, p. 210.

³ *Journal of the African Society*: The Koran in Africa, 1905, by Dr. E. W. Blyden.

⁴ Palgrave's *Arabia*, vol. I, p. 372.

The writer of this passage had in mind the effect and character of Islam in Arabia, and it may not be seriously disputed that there is some truth in what he says if his characterization is extended to mankind in general. But when we come to consider Islam in its effect upon the Black races (Negro) in Africa, we are confronted with a new and different situation; and I am afraid that the description of Palgrave will have to be considerably modified before it harmonizes with the actual facts.

CONTROVERSY OVER ISLAM IN AFRICA

It is very much to be regretted that a great and heated controversy over the character and effect of Islam upon the African Blacks has tended very much to obscure the truth from many interested persons who have not had the privilege to study the question on the ground. Thompson, Smith, Reclus, DuBois, and Blyden are among the recognized leaders of those who take the position that in mental and social culture Islam has greatly improved the African, while Renan, Noble, Blerzey, Church, and Freeman—names quite as prominent in the discussion of African religious problems—entertain just the opposite view. Those who cannot enjoy the opportunity of investigating the situation personally in Africa will find the truth perhaps divided among the members of and between the two schools to which I have referred in a general way. The views of most of the writers are weakened by what seems a desire to champion or discredit Christianity or Islam more than to discover and disclose the whole truth without regard to what might be its effect upon religious thought toward Africa and its races. And yet more and more one school seems to have a little advantage over the other. So that a hurried review of the controversy in a general way will not only enable one to secure an advantage view point, but will throw considerable light upon the particular questions under more immediate consideration.

ISLAM AS AN UPLIFTING FORCE IN AFRICA

Speaking of the Arabian faith upon its entrance into the Sudan (African Black Belt), Mr. Morel gives the important testimony of Joseph Thompson:

Under the fostering impulse and care of the new religion these backward regions commenced an upward progress.⁵

Mr. Thompson's testimony cannot be brushed aside without some reason, for about 1884 he visited that portion of the African Black Belt now known as Northern Nigeria, and he has been described by so able and voluminous a writer as Noble—entertaining just the opposite view—as,

A scientific observer and the humanest, the noblest of African explorers since Livingston.⁶

1. BOSWORTH SMITH

Mr. Bosworth Smith, a remarkable Englishman in that he pored over the pages of the Koran, the works of African travelers and savants until he was not only able to appreciate the spirit of Islam, but he entered into it at a time and in a manner which, as Dr. Blyden says:

But for the antecedent labors of Lane, Sprenger, Deutsch, and Weil, would be astounding in a Western scholar and Englishman.⁷

While lecturing in 1874 at the Royal Institution of Great Britain, Mr. Smith weighed and described the effect of the Muslim faith upon the African Blacks with much of the accuracy of one who had spent some time in observation and study on the ground. And just to indicate his main position I will quote only a few lines:

Christian travelers, with every wish to think otherwise, have remarked that the Negro who accepts Muhammadanism acquires at once a sense of the dignity of human nature not commonly found even among those who have been brought to accept Christianity.⁸

⁵ *Affairs of West Africa*, Morel, p. 211.

⁶ *Redemption of Africa*, Noble, vol. 1, p. 68.

⁷ *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, Dr. Blyden, p. 3.

⁸ *Muhammad and Muhammadanism*, R. B. Smith, Lecture I, p. 32.

2. M. ELISIE RECLUS

The *Geographie Universelle* of M. Elisie Reclus is a classic in African literature.

By it the author

made the scientific world debtor for a vast treasure-house of natural science in its African aspects and relations.⁹

The author of this very valuable and important work speaks of the influence of Islam upon the African races in the Black Belt in these words:

In Nigretia the propagation of Islam coincides with important political and social changes. Large states were founded in regions hitherto a prey to a hundred hostile savage tribes. Manners softened. Solidarity sprang up between communities formerly engaged in ceaseless war. Muhammadanism enjoys more material cohesion in Africa than in Asia. . . . Their common belief tends everywhere to diffuse the social ideas, habits, usages and speech of the Arab. . . . At Mecca the most zealous pilgrims, those subject to most frequent fits of religious frenzy, are the Negroes of Wadai and Bornu and the inhabitants of northwest Abyssinia. Notwithstanding the difficulties of the journey, thousands of Tekrurs undertake the pilgrimage every year. In West Africa the propagators of Islam are Negroes.¹⁰

There is no question but what M. Reclus is an able scholar. He was twenty years preparing what is now regarded as the most complete geography of the world. And it is extremely unlikely, after the most extensive traveling, endowed with the qualifications to render the most eminent services to the world of science, that M. Reclus was entirely mistaken in his estimate of the scope and influence of Islam upon the Africans, contrary to conventional opinion, and describe it with such force and minuteness without such convincing facts as would appeal to every rational mind unaffected by the prejudice of religious bias.

3. DR. EDWARD W. BLYDEN

Dr. Blyden, the well known and eminent West African scholar, wrote in *Frazer's Magazine* in 1875 that:

⁹ *Redemption of Africa*, Noble, vol. 1, p. 68.

¹⁰ *Redemption of Africa*, Noble, vol. 1, p. 68.

Muhammudanism in Africa counts in its ranks the most energetic and enterprising tribes. It claims as adherents the only people who have any form of social polity or bond of social organization. It has built and occupies the largest cities in the heart of the continent. Its laws regulate the most powerful kingdoms—Futah, Masina, Hausa, Bornu, Wadai, Dafur, Kordofan, Senaar, etc.¹¹

Thirty years afterwards, describing the sway of the Koran in Africa, this distinguished writer said:

If there were a railway from West Africa to the Red Sea, and you wished to avail yourself of it to journey to Egypt during the fast—(you might accomplish the journey perhaps in seven days)—you would during those seven days pass through a region where you would find every man, woman, and child in good health observing the fast. On the entire route, 4000 miles—you would notice that the fires were out in the daytime. Sixty millions of people fasting at the same time! I believe that more than half of these are Negroes.¹²

More than thirty years ago Dr. Blyden was not only a scholar but had

enjoyed exceptional advantages for observation and comparison in the United States, the West Indies, South America, Egypt, Syria, West and Central Africa.¹³

As Director of the Department of Muhammdan Education at Sierra Leone he has had the most favored opportunities for ascertaining the influence of Islam upon the African Muslims. And with a scholarship further broadened and enriched with thirty years of study and observation of life and letters in Africa and the world, Dr. Blyden speaks on this question with an authority which must command respect if it cannot secure conviction.

4. M. DUBOIS

M. DuBois, the author of *Timbuctu the Mysterious* and who spent some time in traveling among the Muslims of the Sudan, secured some very valuable manuscripts, and em-

¹¹ *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, Blyden, p. 6.

¹² *The Koran in Africa*, *Journal of African Society*, January, 1905, Blyden.

¹³ Introduction by Sir Samuel Lewis.

ployed these words concerning the intellectual culture of the followers of the Meccan prophet in the African Black Belt:

We possess the biographies of several hundreds of these learned men, and all are related to one another in a more or less direct line. A cerebral refinement was thus produced among a certain proportion of the Negraic population which has had surprising results, as we shall see later, and which gives the categorical lie to the theorists who insist upon the inferiority of the black races.¹⁴

AGAINST ISLAM AS A HELPFUL INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

Against the views and position taken by Thompson, Smith, Reclus, Blyden, and DuBois, we have a long and splendid line of able and resourceful writers headed by Blerzey, Church, Renan, and Freeman, who for the most part have formed their conclusions from the observations of others, and who have not traveled and studied the African in his religious life as much and as long as Thompson, DuBois, and Blyden. Yet their conclusions in many respects are sound and their distance and view point have enabled them to bring to their works a charm and interest which perhaps a closer view would obscure.

Mr. Noble tries to take a very liberal interpretation of the African races of the Sudan, and M. Renan is renowned for his vigorous and trenchant criticisms; so that a citation from each of these will be sufficient to indicate the general trend of opinion against Islam in Africa.

1. M. RENAN

The influence of Islam is summed up by Renan in these words:

On ground none of the best Islam has done as much harm as good. It has stifled everything by its arid and desolating simplicity. . . . The essential condition of a diffused civilization is the destruction of Islam. The product of an inferior and meager combination of human elements, its conquests have all been on the average plane. Savage races have been incapable of rising to it.

¹⁴ *Timbuctu the Mysterious*, DuBois, p. 278.

It has not satisfied the people who carried in themselves the seeds of a stronger civilization.¹⁵

As applied to man generally this quotation seems to express the great trend and weight of opinion among those competent to judge the influence of the different religious schools upon the great masses of the human race. But it embodies a generalization which ignores the truth that the same religious system will affect different social groups differently in different grades of religious culture.

2. NOBLE

In the opinion of Renan, Noble agrees, and after, as he says, turning "from the polemics of partisans such as missionaries, theologians, and travelers," and in the light of history examining the works of such students and scholars as August Mueller, Theodor Noeldeke, Wilhelm Spitta, Dean Stanley, and Wellhausen, he proceeds to judge the worth and the work of Islam in Africa. And after portraying the merits and defects of Islam as an African missionary, among his conclusions he states the following:

Islam has been slow in operation, superficial and unsatisfying in actual achievements. Its African conquests, though larger in area than Europe, cost nearly thirteen hundred years of effort, are more nominal than real, and relatively number but few adherents. As an ethical, spiritual and state-building force it has proved a failure. In Egypt, North Africa and Northern Sahara it supplanted a superior civilization; in the Sudan the Muslim brought a culture little if any superior to that of the Negro. In the lands of the Negro the Muslim success consists of Arab immigrations; the conversion of five or six influential tribes; and their conquests of others.¹⁶

INDICTMENT AGAINST ISLAM

It is said that Islam requires no change of heart or life, that its acceptance is made easy by the simplicity and poverty of its creed; and that its social force is greater than its spiritual potency. They say when charged with polit-

¹⁵ *Redemption of Africa*, Noble, vol. 1, p. 66.

¹⁶ *Redemption of Africa*, Noble.

ical authority the spirit of Islam is military, and that its missionary spirit was just born in the 19th century; that the Koran teems with commands to fight, that the distinctive feature of Islam is the Holy War, and that it regards the sword as the best missionary. With the force of much truth it is observed and pointed out that Islam makes concessions to African beliefs, substitutes the Muslim minister for the medicine-man among the pagans, and replaces the African native fetiches with Koranic verses as amulets. And yet, after all, Mr. Morel who, as editor of the *West African Mail* must keep in touch with conditions and life in West Africa, makes the following significant statement, which in a measure discloses how deeply and profoundly Islam has influenced the life and character of the African:

Individually and collectively the Negro has progressed since Islam crossed the desert, and just as to the Negro fetich of the forest and the swamp religious conceptions permeate every act, preside over every undertaking, and insinuate themselves into every incident of his daily life, so Islam, where it has laid permanent hold upon the Negro, claims from him an allegiance entire and complete.¹⁷

AFRICAN FEALTY TO ISLAM

Mr. Morel cites the authority of a clergyman of the Church Missionary Society who describes,

a ceaseless stream of Haussa pilgrims continually passing through Tripoli on the way to Mecca after a wearisome tramp across the desert,

and reminds us of that larger but still ceaseless stream of Africans from all parts of West Africa, which pours across the drifting and scorching sands of the Sahara for the precious sight of Mecca. It matters but little if the Fulah, Mandingo, Yorof, Egypto-Sudanese followers and the Zanzibari Muhammadans have records as warriors; or, that Islam is discredited from Kartum to Wadelai by Felkin and Wilson, with the Haussas by Barth, the Futa highlander and Mandingos by Lenz, and the Bambara and Yorof by

¹⁷ *Affairs of West Africa*, Morel, Two most interesting chapters on Islam, p. 212.

Brun-Renand; when the evidences from resident students and authorities are increasing that among the Blacks of West Africa and the Sudan, Islam with all its faults—and it has many—is an important and encouraging factor where it has taken root.

Islam does not uplift in the opinion of the writer as Christianity would if embraced and established to the same extent, but Islam is a great and marked improvement upon the pure African pagan. The writer has taken the opportunity to look into the social and religious conditions of the Basas, Goras, Kpwesi, and other pagan tribes on the West African coast, and in industrial skill, self-respect, intellectual energy and attainments, these tribes are far inferior to the Vai and Mandingo Muslims. Whether the superiority of Islamic tribes in Africa has been the direct result of the introduction of the Meccan faith, or whether these tribes because of their superiority have been able to embrace the new religion, is still an open question. But that Islamic influence is a fundamental factor in the life of the African in the Sudan and has made some valuable contributions to African life and Sudanese culture are no longer open to serious dispute or refutation from those who have familiarized themselves with the situation on the ground.

SOME EVIDENCES OF ISLAMIC BENEFIT

The writer found a Black Mussulman within twenty miles of the West African coast with nearly one hundred and fifty volumes in Arabic covering a wide range of subjects. Fifty of these volumes were written by African (Negro) authors on law, theology, music, grammar, rhetoric and medicine.

It is very improbable that the African Black races would master Arabic, a foreign language, with such proficiency as would enable them to produce authors in this alien tongue, and this too on such varied and important subjects without being themselves benefited and impressed by not only the language, but the literature and culture of Arabia.

In glancing over the list of books it discloses what would be natural to expect among the Black peoples to whom Ara-

bian language and literature had been brought through the missionary and military efforts of Islam. There are seven books in law, five in science and medicine, seven in grammar and rhetoric, fourteen in music, and seventeen in theology.

The Black race is well known to be highly musical, and its authorship in this fine art as far as this Muslim library will disclose, shows that the language was made to pay tribute to the African's nature and respond to one of his greatest pleasures.

But great as seems to be the tendency of African authorship in music—where you would naturally expect to find it—it appears to be even greater in theology where it is equally natural to expect and to find it. The Koran inspired the learning of the Arabian language and questions of religion considered therein would most likely attract the greatest authorship among the proselyted peoples, at least for a time.

ISLAMIC INFLUENCE AMONG THE AFRICAN VAIS

Islam is a potent force in the religious life and practice of the Vais. Whether the Vais accepted this faith before or since they came down from the far interior is not material now. The Vais, Mandingos, Bambaras, Sosos, and Mendis belong to the Mande family, and occupy the territory behind Liberia and Sierra Leone including the sources of the Niger River. This is a very important group of the African Black races and the ethnic family touches the West African coast at two points: once in Liberia and once north of Sierra Leone.

Speaking of the Vais, Rev. S. W. Koelle said fifty years ago that not more than one-fourth of them were Muhamudans. The number is much larger now. A Christian missionary who had worked among the Vais for a number of years estimated that 95 per cent of the tribe are Muslims. This estimate is no doubt a little high. The writer found many Vais who were still pagans, and from observation and other sources of information approximates the pagan Vais to be about one-third of the Vai population.

In most of the towns and some of the half-towns the

Muhammudans have schools and mosques, and are generally regarded as being considerably superior to their pagan brothers. In the schools the boys are taught Arabic and some of them become quite proficient in it. Instruction is given in Arabic in order that the Koran above all other books may be read, and yet when once learned other works of Arabian literature are read and studied.

In the mosques the adherents of Islam may be seen praying five times a day, but wherever they are they pray before sunrise, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening, and just at night. It is said, when praying, that Muhammad turned his face to the West,

Because, as he said, from that quarter crowds will enter the religion of Islam and be among the most faithful of its adherents.

Admirably the prophecy has been fulfilled. But the Vais in praying turn their faces to the East toward Kaaba, a sacred shrine in Mecca, believed to be a special gift of God and the favorite praying-place of Ishmael and Abraham. Vai Mussulmen seem to be deeply possessed by their religion and their practice corresponds to what they profess. For thirty days they hold the annual fast of Ramadhan, at the close of which they celebrate the festival of Bairam. With one as leader, gathered in a group, for hours the writer has listened to them chanting from memory the sacred lines of the Koran.

MORAL AND RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE OF FETICHISM

Although African paganism teaches many superstitious beliefs and is founded upon the false hypothesis that man is surrounded by malignant and invisible spirits and that it is necessary for him to make regular sacrifices to them in order that his life and fortune may be secure from their injury and revenge, yet when thoroughly understood as it operates upon the African's mind and in its general influence and social pressure, one of its chief natural effects is to give spiritual training in many of the essentials of morals as we understand the term:

To do good to others; to sacrifice for their benefit your own wishes; to love your neighbor as yourself; to forgive your enemies; to restrain your passions; to honor your parents; to respect those who are set over you; these, and a few others are the sole essentials of morals.¹⁸

So that African fetichism in its ultimate analysis is not such a debasing and degradizing superstition as is generally believed by Christian thinking nations of the West. It is only one of the African institutions whose common object is to furnish the individual with ideas and rules of thought and conduct as they enter into and constitute African life under the interesting phenomena of African physical and social conditions. And it is now becoming more generally recognized that African institutions should be altered only after they have been thoroughly understood, and then with the greatest of care and caution as there are few of them which do not register some social advantage or benefit in the family or tribal life of the African. The African ju ju, which seems to give the false impression that the African is a worshiper of false gods, when fully comprehended in all its phases and functions, discloses the fact that the African struggling through the centuries has found in his own way the same God whom we serve and who made the heaven and the earth and all that in them is from monera to man and from atom to star. And the deep spiritual nature of the African with his cheerful smile and happy disposition under circumstances which distress and despair other races may be traced to the contributing influence of African fetichism.

ISLAM AS A MORAL FORCE IN WEST AFRICA

It is because African fetichism enters into almost every phase of African life that its moral influence is important. But the moral influence of Islam is even more important, because Islam imparts a religious zeal and gives scope for intellectual enthusiasm which are incompatible with the nature and character of fetichism. In the customs, ceremonies, deaths, dances, and social functions the influences of

¹⁸ *Introduction to Civilization in England*, Buckle, p. 103.

Islam are easily noticed by competent observers throughout West Africa. Everywhere Islam presents evidences of being indigenous to the soil. It surrenders few things indispensable to Muhammadanism, but compromises upon many important to the African. It is therefore a vital and living force, interesting in no particular more than in its moral aspects. They are substantially the same among the Vais as among the other Muhammadan tribes of the Black races.

The moral code of the Islamic Prophet is fashioned after the Sinaitic laws in two series of five precepts each. These precepts are well known by the Vai and other West African Musselmen, who take pride in committing the Koran to memory. Among the precepts might be mentioned the following:

(1) To acknowledge no other gods but God; (2) to show respect to parents; (3) not to kill children on account of dread of starvation; (4) to preserve chastity; (5) to protect the life of others except where justice demands the contrary; (6) to keep inviolate the property of orphans; (7) to employ just weights and measures; (8) not to overburden slaves; (9) judges to be impartial; (10) to keep oaths sacred and the covenants with God.¹⁹

Such are the important moral principles or precepts which are taught by the Islamic priests among the Vais. Their influence has given a higher standard and tone to the life of the Muhammadan than the pagan Vais. But the fact that Islamic teachings do not disturb the institutions of polygamy and slavery there is not that scope and field for the development of moral excellence which obtains among Christian nations. The knowledge of the Koranic faith, with its moral code and concomitants of Arabian culture and arts, impart to the Muslim Vais a higher order of individual intelligence and moral consciousness. It may be noticed in the personal dignity and importance which characterize the individual bearing and conduct of Muhammadan adherents. It may be observed in the attitude taken by Muhammadan converts on many family and tribal customs and ceremonial institutions and functions. And in nothing is it so striking

¹⁹ *The Races of Man*, Oscar Peschel: p. 303.

as in the abstinence from strong drink, gambling, and the common vices of pagan peoples. There is a marked scarcity of means for disseminating the knowledge of the Koran which prevents the fullest diffusion of Koranic morals. So that while the moral standard is much higher among Muslims than the pagan Vais, the degree of its excellence varies with the intelligence and opportunities of the former class to understand and absorb the new religion in its different phases.

SOME REASONS WHY ISLAM IS WIDELY ACCEPTED BY AFRICANS

There are many reasons why Islam is widely accepted among the African races of West Africa and the Sudan. Perhaps among the reasons most easily noticed, immediate and far-reaching in its influence, is what may be termed Mission Pedagogy.²⁰ The teachers and propagators of Islam are so diplomatic and tactful in presenting the spirit and principles of their Prophet. They go along the line of least resistance and insinuate themselves into the confidence of the people they approach before the people are really aware of the object and ultimate aim of their visitors. They meet and treat the people as equals, residing with them in their towns, marrying the African women, and showing the greatest sympathy with and interest in African institutions and customs, and yet modifying and altering them whenever they can do so without doing great violence to the feelings and habits of the people. Often the writer has seen these Islamic missionaries entreating the people in strange and pagan native towns to lend to them their children that they might be taught by them for a time. Sometimes only with the greatest difficulty would they secure one or two children, and then after much vain pleading and begging, they would return to their apartments and begin their work with as much zeal and devotion as though they had received instead of the apathy and opposition of the people the favor of the town.

²⁰ *Journal of Race Development*, October, 1910, Mission Pedagogy, Dr. Hall, p. 127.

Day after day with patience and without price these Muhammdan priests would humbly come before the people for the opportunity to instruct their children until finally apathy was kindled into interest, a great Muhammdan center was established, the pagan ju ju replaced by Islamic amulets, and Muhammad acknowledged as the only Prophet of the true God. In this way Islam has won town after town and tribe after tribe until today among the Black races of the African Black Belt unnumbered millions are firm believers and ardent devotees to the Meccan faith and Teacher. They come in many ways, sometimes as schoolmasters, traders, readers, scribes, venders of amulets, priests, mallams, and marabuts, whatever way seems best to make Islam acceptable and triumphant. When it is thoroughly established its influence may be seen in the very appearance of the native towns and important vows are exacted of all adherents, including abstinence from liquors, vices and luxuries. Islamic ceremonies and frequent prayers, the distinctive costumes of their priests, and their general manners, are some of the many outward signs and marks of the Muhammdanized population among the African Blacks.

There are other reasons why Africans feel and entertain such strong attachment to Islam. Among other things it is taught that the African Black races have a high and honorable part in the history and notable achievements of the Muhammdan faith. By the best informed Muhammdans the people are made to feel a pride in the fact that the Black races are recognized in the Koran, which contains a chapter inscribed to an African (Negro).²¹ The people are told that Muhammad was in part descended from an African and had a Black man as a confidant in Arabia. It is pointed out that Black men figured prominently in the military and religious progress of Islam, and on one occasion slew a rival of Muhammad. It is said that the Prophet greatly admired a Black poet of anti-Islamic times and expressed his deep regret that he had never seen him.

The Africans thus feel a close relationship to the Koranic

²¹ Logman: Chapter 31, *Koran*, Steingrass' translation, vol. II, p. 245.

faith. As their kinsmen they name their children after Muhammad and the prophets. As equals they delight to think of and commune with the great masters of their faith, many of whom are Black men. Often little African Black boys have been seen writing in Arabic the important names of the Koran. So that with all the pride of distinguished ancestors, with the names of great Black men, remembered as renowned in the military history and progress of Islam, and with all the inspiration which a knowledge of the Koran and its language gives, the Muhammudan teachers and missionaries have been going forth daily for centuries, without money and without price, to teach and widen the influence of Islam among their pagan Africans. So that it can no longer be successfully denied that Muhammudanism is a vital and living force among the millions of the African Black Belt.

SOME INTELLECTUAL ASPECTS OF ISLAM IN AFRICA

Aside from the religious and general influence of Islam in Africa it has some intellectual aspects which might be considered in some of its broader features. We now know that for centuries from Egypt, Nubia, Abyssinia, and the Barbary States, streams of Arabian culture emptied into the African Black Belt in many intellectual forms; pilgrimages obtained special learning from Mecca and Medina, and secured from Cairo much of the civilization of the East. When the Saracens were finally driven from Spain, the Moorish scholars and poets carried to the Blacks in the African Sudan the intellectual wealth and harvests of Grenada and Cordova.

Among the Black Sudanese races centers of learning were established, in which rhetoric, logic, eloquence, diction and the principles of the Koran were taught to the theologians. Law according to Malakite and artistic writing were given to the jurists. There were regular courses in hygiene, medicine, grammar, prosody, philosophy, ethnography, music and astronomy. A number of Black authors arose, distinguished for their writings on traditions, biographies,

annals, law, music, history and theology. Black African scholars rivaled their Arabian masters. Near the mosque of Sankore, it is said that their apartments were to Timbuctu, the "Queen of the Sudan," what the "Quartier Latin" is to Paris. Among the distinguished marabuts and eminent Black African scholars and writers M. DuBois mentions Mohaman Kati and Ahmen Baba, the former the author of *Fatassi*, a history of the kingdoms of Ganata, Songhai and the City of Timbuctu, and the latter the author of more than twenty known books. Baba's library contained the fewest books of all his friends, and yet he had 1600 volumes. The learning and scholarship of the Sudanese Blacks were genuine and so thorough that,

During their sojourns in the foreign universities of Fez, Tunis, and Cairo they astounded the most learned men of Islam by their erudition. That these Negroes were on a level with the Arabian savants is proved by the fact that they were installed as professors in Morocco and Egypt.²²

ELEMENTS OF CULTURE AMONG THE AFRICAN VAIS

It is therefore mainly from the learned Sudanese Blacks and a few Arabs that Islam and Arabian arts and culture were extended throughout West Africa, in which movement the members of the Mande family figure prominently. The Mandingos are perhaps the most widely and favorably known of this ethnic group. Their industry, dignity, culture, and the breadth of their Muhammudan scholarship have made them so impressive that they are universally regarded and termed by their neighbors as the "Gentlemen of West Africa." It is from their ranks that come the most eminent marabuts, schoolmasters, priests, and doctors of the Muslim faith.

Belonging to the same ethnic branch the Vais have shared in the Muhammudan attainments and reputation of the Mandingos. And just as the Mandingos are called the "Gentlemen of West Africa," the Vais because of their own distinctive development along different and the same lines

²² *Timbuctu the Mysterious*, M. DuBois, p. 285.

are often referred to as the "Romans of West Africa." It is not to be understood that every Mandingo and Vai Muhammudan is deeply cultured, any more than every person residing in Christian states is highly cultured in the principles of Christian civilization. The great masses of the greatest nations, with all the advantages of improved machinery, science applied to all forms of industry, printing presses, the best literature in cheap editions, and the great ennobling influence of the Christian church, have not as yet risen above the mere struggle for bread. Most of the books in Africa among the Vais are written by hand. The lack of modern facilities for printing and making books, not only make them dear but scarce as well. Yet under all the difficulties many of the Vais read and write Arabic fluently; but with them as with other peoples high culture and deep scholarship are reserved for the few who are willing to pay in time and labor the price for their acquisition.

Culture is the result of knowledge, the essence of digested facts. As it obtains among the Vai scholars it has two fundamental phases: Knowledge which has come to them through the introduction of Muhammudanism, etc., and that which they have acquired from experience and study under the pressure of African conditions. From Arabian and other foreign sources Vai Mallams like Murfey, Vahney, Seriff, Mambroru, Vahney Sonie, Boma Dadu, and Momoru Declay possess a rich and varied fund of information that is as admirable as it is astonishing. Besides their familiarity with Islam, Arabian arts, letters and learning, they speak of the countries and cities of the East as we do of Europe. They are likewise acquainted with the general geography of the West. No doubt the increased communication with Europe and the founding of the Republic of Liberia by citizens of the United States with the aid and sanction of the American government materially increased the geographic interest which had already been awakened by the slave traffic on the West Coast some centuries before.

From Arabian and other foreign sources Vai scholars and West Africans generally have secured valuable information on statecraft and the art of war. Arabian and Eastern

models may be seen in the cut of their dress, and in the designs for their useful and decorative arts. Works on music written by Black men and Arabic scholars are common in Vai libraries. Some of the Vai scholars have a wealth of literature by Sudanese and Arabic authors and on a wide range of subjects, among them might be named poetry, philosophy, theology, grammar, rhetoric, and ethics.

One is surprised at their knowledge of hygiene, physiology, and the principles of medicine. Some of the cures which are effected by some of these Vai doctors simply stagger belief. Instances are cited where their surgeons have extracted bullets and set bones, removing fractured and shattered parts, that would be a surgical triumph in any country. This may seem incredible, but when you see an African doctor wash one man's hand in a medical solution, see the same hand thrust into boiling palm oil to the bottom of a kettle with the same ease with which the hand may be put into cold water and withdrawn without either pain or injury; and when you attempt to put your hand in without this preparation you find you can scarcely approach the kettle on account of the extreme heat, something suggests to the strongest incredulity that perhaps these people have learned something which has not yet interested modern medical science.

SOME NATIVE ELEMENTS OF VAI CULTURE

Perhaps after all the most important phase of Vai culture is the native element, for it was because of this element on the one hand that Muhammadanism found such fertile soil in Africa, and on the other that the Black races were able to attain such flattering heights in Islamic scholarship. Like other tribes of the African races the Vais have much native knowledge and skill in the industrial arts. From wood, iron, grass, gold and silver they have known for centuries how to fashion products for useful and decorative purposes. They weave, manufacture, and dye cloth in varied figures and beautiful designs. They possess considerable knowledge regarding the utility of vines and the medicinal properties

of roots and herbs for many African diseases and complaints. They have men familiar with great systems of law founded in equity, and with the great aim and philosophy of government. They understand the ultimate social influence of institutions, and their final importance and social value in terms of ethical culture. They have a written language, originated and invented by a Vai man—Momoru Doala Bukere—with an alphabet of about two hundred characters. In their traditions, myths, legends, folklore, fiction, songs and tales of romance, they have an African literature.

Of the numerous Vai writings, in traveling through the Vai country, some may be seen in manuscript form and others written on wooden tablets. Perhaps the oldest and most interesting of these Vai writings is the autobiography of Ndole Wono. So far as known it is the masterpiece of Vai literature. It contains an account of Wono's wanderings into the interior, his romantic adventure with a princess, and concludes with a tragic description of his mother's death. It is indeed a thrilling story and justified the publication given to it some fifty odd years ago by the Rev. S. W. Koelle, a distinguished linguist of London who visited the Vai country during the lifetime of Bukere—the Vai inventor.

They are familiar with the great literature of the Blacks and Arabs in the Sudan and in Arabia. Young Vai students and scholars are sent to Musardu, Timbuctu, and other centers of African learning in search of the broadest and deepest African culture. If we consider that the Vais have a written language and literature; that their scholars and the scholars of other tribes have mastered their native literature; have committed the Koran almost to memory; are familiar with the Holy Bible and phases of its higher criticism; are the authors of songs and stories of charm and broad human interest; speak besides Arabic a number of native tongues; and possess a fund of information upon a variety of subjects and their physical environment, we cannot condemn too severely the critic who termed these people the "Romans of West Africa."

SOME AFRICAN OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

It is the opinion of the great Christian churches with missionary operations in Africa that ultimately this great continent will be redeemed by the blood and spirit of Christ. And during the last half a century Christian churches have made some very important religious conquests among the different African races in different sections of the continent. I will only pause to mention the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church of the United States on the West African coast and in other sections of Africa under Bishops Taylor, Hartzell, and Scott, and the special work of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States among the Grebos of Cape Palmas and the Vais of Grand Cape Mount, under Bishop Ferguson.

And while we may hope to redeem Africa and can point to many advances made by Christian missionaries, attested by many flourishing missionary stations on the East and West coasts, from whose influence thousands of the African races have embraced the religion of Christ and accepted as the criterion of their lives the standard of the Western nations; yet it must be remembered that if the White races of the West are to redeem the Black races of Africa, Africans insist that there are two or three things which should be taken into consideration in the future missionary polity of the Christian churches.

1. Islam in Africa will have to be thoroughly studied, and its influence upon the Black races fully understood and carefully measured. It must be considered as a serious rival, overcome by the message of genuine Christianity, and supplanted by rendering to the African races superior religious and social service. The Muhammadanized African scholars and priests read and write Arabic fluently; know the Koran by heart and can recall its different parts and recite from it continuously for hours without apparent difficulty. Upon this book they are familiar with numerous commentators, Black and White, and can discuss its tenets in the light of the most critical interpretation of the profoundest Islamic scholarship. Many of them have Arabic copies of the New

Testament, know the thrilling story of the life and practice of Jesus and all the essential principles of the Christian faith.

2. More and more the students of the African situation are coming to the conclusion that in Africa natural and societary conditions are so dissimilar to those obtaining among Western peoples, that the only redemption of the African races that is worth while is that which instead of attempting to wholly westernize the Black races in Africa, endeavors to develop the African in harmony with the laws of his own being and nature under the social and physical forces which for centuries have brought into existence the great body and form of African life and destiny. At best in Africa they say they can be made but poor Europeans; they prefer to be good and great Africans. In supplanting Islam and destroying African fetichism, it is not enough to simply take care of the African's religious life, for his social and political institutions must be supplied and sustained by sanctions as strong and as effective as those of which he has been deprived, or we may leave the African unable to live our life and in a more helpless state than his own.

In other words it is necessary to interpret Christianity to the African mind and situation in some such way as President Hall would have it fitted to the occidental:

We certainly need today a great master fortified with modern learning, charged with the positive inspiration for original reconstruction and able to restate Christianity in a way to fit the occidental cultivated mind as Paul adjusted it to the leaders of the Greek cities. The church ought to believe that other Pauls are still possible and that they may one day arrive and free the Christian world from the bond of dogma and wont and extend its quintessential requirements of loving and serving God and man to the utmost bounds of the earth.²³

3. The African mind finds serious and confusing difficulties in accepting Christianity with all its heated controversies and rivalry over denominational doctrines and lines. And the progress of Christianity in Africa will be very much accelerated when Christian denominations shall agree upon and come to a common understanding about certain

²³ *Journal of Race Development*, October, 1910, p. 128.

fundamentals of the Christian faith, in the advocacy of which all denominational differences and doctrines shall be forgotten.

Other writers, but Dr. Blyden in particular, have pointed out certain additional objections on the part of the African to Christianity: (1) That it has a disintegrating influence upon the African family and state; (2) because of its caste distinctions based upon differences of race; (3) and because the liquor traffic is carried on to the shame and degradation of African races by the great civilized and Christian nations.²⁴

For the most part these conditions should not be charged to Christianity, for they are independent of and exist in spite of it. For while Christianity as presented may tend to disintegrate the African family and state, founded upon polygamy, yet if properly presented it would be a great integrating and socializing factor for the African peoples, assisting them gradually to found their family and state upon the standard of the highest domestic principle. The history of the human race, attested by the grandest achievements, demonstrates that the polygamic family is inconsistent with the highest domestic, social and spiritual development of mankind. This objection is already passing away and will completely disappear when missionary leaders are instructed by broader knowledge of the particular missionary fields and by closer contact with the nature and magnitude of the religious problems involved.

So far as the objection to Christianity is concerned, on account of caste distinctions based purely on race differences, it cannot be sustained against the theory and principles of Christianity, but it is too well founded as against the practice. For in dealing with the African the White race has shown itself amazingly incompetent to think without prejudice, or to act upon just and equitable principles. To the great detriment of both races physical and other differences have been invariably and erroneously mistaken for evidences of natural inferiority. Christian civilization has done much to correct this error, but as yet it has not been

²⁴*Journal of the African Society*, Koran in Africa, Blyden, January, 1905.

able to wholly eradicate it. And in so far as the discrimination of Christians against Africans is concerned, it simply discloses that the discriminators, with all the advantages of their great religion and modern civilization, have not been able to any great extent to measure up to the high standard of the Master of their faith. It is hoped also that this objection will pass away with a better knowledge of and understanding among the races.

As to the objection to Christianity on account of the liquor traffic, it is less tenable than the previous ones, for the Christian church everywhere has set its seal of condemnation upon the liquor habit. The African does not seem to understand how governments controlled by Christians indulge and permit their citizens and subjects to engage in this destructive and damaging trade. They do not comprehend that under our freedom many who are not Christians are willing to brave the public scorn and suffer the social penalties of their Christian fellows to secure the profits of the liquor business. Its prohibition is possible, but the appetite for strong drink is so steady and universal, that it is at least exceedingly difficult to accomplish. No doubt the liquor trade is a curse and blight to Africa, but it is improperly charged to Christianity. It is an evil of society just as slavery was in America and as polygamy is now in Africa. And they will all disappear in time as American slavery did, when the different branches and members of the human race have evolved through the social and religious agencies of civilization to that stage where their abolition are demanded.

And yet with all the advantages which Islam has had for centuries and all the difficulties under which missionaries labor in Africa, the Christian church has little or no reason to be discouraged. For more and more the nations of the earth are being brought closer and closer to what was once the dream of universal brotherhood.

Upon the initiation of the President of the United States of America for the first time in the history of the world, the representatives of all the universally recognized sovereigns of the earth gathered in June 1907 in open and free discussion at The Hague. An International Court was

established; thirty-five out of forty-five states were committed to the high principle of obligatory arbitration; and The Hague Tribunal was transformed from a directed to a self-governing body of all of the world sovereignties with power to define its own limits and determine its destiny. Fifteen other separate and independent and powerful international bodies, working in every sphere of international interests, ethics, economics and society, have organized and combined to declare that the interest of all the nations is one and that the international business of the world is to be transacted in harmony, unity and peace. The spirit of the Christ is abroad among the nations, and in countless ways and subtle forms it is influencing the world affairs of men as it never did before. The Christian prospect brightens and as we look over the field we find it difficult to resist the thought that one day even in Africa the Crescent must wane before the Cross.

In the presence of this thought I am reminded of a master painting at Paris which I never can forget, whose tenderness and beauty distinguished it from all the rest. It was a picture of light and love, and represents an immortal scene in Bethlehem. Early morn can just be seen breaking the glad news on the distant, misty mountain tops. In an old stable a happy mother fondles in her arms her Infant Babe. Carrying in a basket two little turtle doves a beautiful shepherdess gazes with admiring wonder upon this Infant Child, whose life is still illuminating the world as his Body then lighted the faces of those who stood about, astounded and amazed. Like a peasant before a king with a common stick in his hand here stands an old shepherd. And just beyond is a young herdsman, with one hand on the manger and the other on a large dog, watching in ecstatic joy a bevy of angels balancing themselves above upon a cloud, and from whose honeyed lips there seemed to come this sweet refrain;

Peace on earth and good will to men.

At the bottom of the picture are these simple and impressive words:

The Prince of Peace, the Light of the World.